

# When the hacks go hacking

Mark Sergeant on phone hacking, *Schadenfreude* and ethics

One story that has dominated the UK media in the last few months is the alleged widespread phone hacking at the *News of the World*. On a pretty much daily basis there have been fresh revelations about the number and type of individuals who may have been targeted, ranging from celebrities to politicians, sports stars to victims of crimes or their families. A number of editors, high-profile executives and police officers have been called to answer questions in front of MPs, and there have been a number of arrests and resignations associated with the phone-hacking scandal.

For most people, being hacked would, quite simply, mean an invasion of their personal lives. The idea of a complete stranger being able to browse through phone messages, let alone other forms of personal communication such as e-mails and letters, would be seen as a violation of privacy. However, if hacking is conducted on behalf of a news organisation then this personal information could potentially be seen by millions of complete strangers. Even among celebrities, who may be familiar with details of their personal lives appearing in the media, this is likely to be seen as an extreme violation of their privacy that cannot be justified by their high profile with the public. As the actor Hugh Grant, who claims to have been a victim of the hacking, remarked, 'It's back to the old cliché of what is interesting to the public and what is in the public interest. A lot of it is of interest to the public but none of it is in the public interest.'

Possibly one of the most distressing impacts of the whole affair was on the parents of Milly Dowler, the schoolgirl murdered in 2002. It is alleged that individuals working for the *News of the World* had listened to voicemail messages on her phone and then deleted some

when the memory had become full. This activity on her phone would have given Milly Dowler's family false hope that she was still alive.

Many have questioned how those in the media could have become involved in the unpleasant practice of phone hacking in the first place. Furthermore, despite the allegations first coming to light in 2005, and resulting in convictions and imprisonments in 2007, how could the phone hacking have continued for so long? Professor Rex Wright, of the Department of Psychology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, stated on the ScienceDaily website ([tinyurl.com/3o8h3gu](http://tinyurl.com/3o8h3gu)): 'People might have felt that this was a small price to pay for a very lucrative activity. They also might have believed the odds of getting caught twice were small, especially if police officials were turning a blind eye. They might have had some arrangement with officials that allowed them to continue if they had resignations and convictions on occasion.'

In the past the *News of the World* had a tendency to report on the indiscretions of various celebrities and political figures. Often these revelations caused embarrassment to the individuals in question, leading readers to possibly experience varying degrees of *Schadenfreude*. Although there's no direct English translation, Emily Anthes quite aptly defined it as 'that small, private rush of glee in response to someone else's misfortune' ([tinyurl.com/324reu3](http://tinyurl.com/324reu3)).

In a somewhat ironic twist of fate, many people have experienced *Schadenfreude* as a result of Rupert Murdoch's recent troubles, particularly following his questioning by a committee of MPs, during which he had a pie made of shaving foam thrown at him by Jonathan May-Bowles ([tinyurl.com/3qx8417](http://tinyurl.com/3qx8417)). Research by psychologist Wilco van Dijk of Leiden University ([tinyurl.com/3pxnfmnd](http://tinyurl.com/3pxnfmnd)) suggests that individuals experience greater *Schadenfreude* when high-achieving individuals, such as the multi-billionaire and highly influential media tycoon Rupert Murdoch, are seen to experience problems.

Is hacking ever justifiable though?

A tabloid journalist, who blogs under the name Fleet Street Fox ([www.fleetstreetfox.com](http://www.fleetstreetfox.com)) raised a hypothetical question: If you knew there was a voicemail on Rebekah Brooks's mobile that clearly implicated high-profile individuals in the phone-hacking allegations, would you hack into her phone to get that message?

Fleet Street Fox is quite upfront about what she'd do: 'I'd hack the phone. You'd probably hack the phone. Heck, Jeremy Paxman, Alan Rusbridger, Woodward and bloody Bernstein would all hack that phone. And if you think it's all right to hack Rebekah Brooks' phone then there are other circumstances in which it's also right. To catch a dodgy politician, expose corruption at the heart of FIFA, locate someone the cops can't find.' In other words, hacking could, theoretically, be defended if it's in the public interest; the ends (exposing illegal acts and corruption) justifying the means.

At this point I'm strangely reminded of some of the classic 'ethically problematic' studies in psychology, such as those of Milgram and Zimbardo for two reasons. The first is that such studies are often used to debate research ethics with students; whether the ends (the extra insight gained about the way our minds work) ever justifies the means (causing distress to participants). When considering this issue though, it should obviously be pointed out though that academic research and journalism have very different means and ends.

The second reason I'm reminded of the Milgram and Zimbardo studies is that they showed us people can engage in unethical behaviours when their actions are either endorsed by those in a position of authority or they're normalised by the culture in which individuals operate.



contribute

The Media page is coordinated by the Society's Media and Press Committee, with the aim of

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